DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 364 837 CS 011 478

AUTHOR Swanson, Ann
TITLE Adult Book Club Discussions: Response as a Key.
PUB DATE 1 Dec 93
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (43rd, Charleston, SC, December 1-4, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adults; *Discussion; *Group Behavior; *Group Dynamics; *Literature Appreciation; Questioning Techniques; Reader Response; Reading Research; Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS *Book Clubs; Discourse Communities; Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

A study explored what an outside-the-classroom, authentic literature discussion involved. Three book club discussions (involving a leaderless group consisting of members of varying professions meeting monthly to discuss fiction and nonfiction reading selections) were audiotaped, transcribed and coded. Results indicated that: (1) when allowed to address any issue in the discussion of a text, the book club members spoke for a slightly longer time than is common in classrooms; (2) as the discussion moved along, respondents spoke for increasingly longer periods of time; (3) disagreement between members were never hostile and rarely direct; (4) several times during discussion, members requested affirmation of opinions or ideas; and (5) discussants responded with engagement in three key ways--descriptive text talk, parroting characters' words or thoughts, and placing words into characters' mouths or minds. Findings related to secondary literacy education suggest that students may benefit from a chance to develop group discussions and relationships surrounding texts, and they may benefit from and enjoy a chance to explore their own and each other's ideas without direction. (Contains 15 references.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Ann Swanson
University of Minnesota
5804 South Drive
Edina, MN 55436
swan0048@gold.tc.umn.edu

ED 364 837

Adult Book Club Discussions: Response as a Key

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A. Swanson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Paper presented at NRC: Charleston, SC December 1, 1993

CS011478

Running Head: ADULT BOOK CLUB DISCUSSIONS

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Adult Book Club Discussions: Response as a Key

Paper presented at NRC: Charleston, SC December 1, 1993

Running Head: ADULT BOOK CLUB DISCUSSIONS

As the social construction theory of knowledge has gained credence in the academic world, researchers and teachers alike have struggled to see how their students make sense of the world around them and how educators can assist them. Theorists and researchers have advocated that students interact on their own terms according to their own agendas (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; O'Flahavan, et. al., 1992), yet it would seem that we do not know much about what happens in these situations. What do students do, and how do they do it?

In an effort to begin to answer these questions, studying an on-going group which engages in free, leader-less interactions may yield some directions to pursue in further research. During the past two years, I have studied one such leader-less group, a book club composed of members of varying professions which has gathered monthly for six years to discuss fiction and non-fiction reading selections. With reference to discussions of this book club, the following questions will be addressed in this paper: How do adult book club discussants interact authentically about text? Do participants' responses figure into their discussions? Could the findings from the analysis of adult discussions possess ramifications for secondary school literacy students that are different from the implications of the research already done with elementary-level book clubs?

Little research has has been done on adult book clubs until recent years. Long (1986, 1987) wrote about adult book clubs operating in Texas, but her perspective deals more with the sociological aspects of the clubs. The only other works existing prior to April of 1993 that deal with adult book clubs are an AERA paper delivered by Smith in April 1992 and the on-going research into teachers' book clubs being conducted by Flood and Lapp (1992).

Both the Smith and Flood and Lapp papers utilize Marshall's paper on classroom discourse (1989), which extensively examined 25 discussions in the classrooms of six teachers. As Cazden (1988) had also previously found, the teachers in Marshall's study controlled the vast majority of discussions, and

student utterances were largely limited to information giving, usually supplying one word answers to teachers' factual recall questions. Given that the teachers in Marshall's study, as well as others, see the ideal discussion as one where "the role of the teacher is to orchestrate the discussion almost invisibly" (Marshall, 1989) and given that this does not usually happen, it may behoove us to examine discussions where there are no teachers or leaders. What happens in those discussions? Are they chaotic, and do they go nowhere, as the teachers in Marshall's study feared? Is nothing accomplished? Is there no knowledge that students take away with them? May it, conversely, be that they learn more than they might otherwise?

A group of Michigan State University researchers has undertaken "The Book Club Project" to discover what middle elementary students will do on their own when they discuss books in their classes. In several of their articles and papers (Raphael et. al., 1992; McMahon, 1992a; McMahon, 1992b), the researchers discuss how students talk about books and the problems they have encountered as students learn the process of book club discussions. Their data indicate that, over time, students discuss the important topics that teachers would have discussed with them, yet the students often rely on their reading logs to form the basis of their discussions instead of allowing their discussions to focus more on their own more immediate personal and group concerns (McMahon, 1992b).

As for the study of secondary students, Hurst (1988) studied eighth grade students in Britain who talked about poetry with one another without the teacher present in the room. Interestingly, and perhaps because of their ages which allowed them to internalize the accepted mode of school discourse, while Hurst's students were set to engage in a free-form discussion, their discussions looked more like classroom discourse than did, for instance, the Michigan State's elementary students' discussions.

In an effort to further extend the discourse about how groups can,

should, and do talk about reading, O'Flahavan et. al. (1992) conducted an exhaustive search of the published literature. At the secondary level, they found that there were no studies conducted in the United States that documented what happened in groups where teachers did not control the discussion.

In their work that discusses classroom discourse and literature achievement, Nystrand and Gamoron (1991) found that sec. .ary students were "substantively engaged," actively learning, when they were allowed the time to extensively interact during "*real* small-group work and *real* discussion where students have some input into and control over the discourse" (p. 266). While the authors measured student engagement with their work, not specifically group interactions, they argue that the potential for student learning would be enhanced if teachers backed away from their agendas and let students experiment with the making of meaning.

While the Michigan State group has examined how students interact when discussing literature without the teacher present in their groups, no one has looked specifically at how individual and groups responses fit into the discussions and figure in the sustaining of interest in reading. The key questions are a) how do book club members use response in their discussions, and b) does response have any bearing upon continued participation in discussion and other literacy activities?

So far, it seems that few researchers studying book clubs have looked at the interaction patterns for answers to the response questions. Smith and Marshall argued that much is to be learned about literacy in practice and that much can be learned by studying adult book clubs that practice exactly what teachers wish students would and could do--read, listen, and interact with others concerning text. Interestingly, though, Smith and Marshall chose to study book clubs that functioned similarly to classrooms where there were specific leaders or members who were assigned to bring in background

information and/or book reviews as well as assigned to prepare questions and topics for exploration. Smith and Marshall themselves more fully likened adult reading groups to classrooms because "the goals of the adult groups are very similar to those articulated by the teachers" (Marshall, p. 13) who look at their role as one of "taking students further and deeper into an analysis of the text" (Smith & Marshall, p. 6). Again, in order for the readers to discover meaning, the emphasis for discussion is on getting somewhere, as if reading were purely a point or information-driven enterprise (Hunt & Vipond, 1985).

Sweigart (1991) argues that classroom talk should be, and is, valued by students because it "enhances [their] ability to recode, to represent new and emerging knowledge to themselves in a way that both makes sense and makes the knowledge accessible for future use," (p. 471) and helps them explore their tentative ideas. They also valued its unstructured format, which freed them to attend to their interests and pressing issues.

In Freedman's work (1992) on student writing response groups, she found that only 40% of students' talk was "authentic," based upon what their really wanted to know and say concerning their writing. Giving students a format for discussion seemed to elicit mostly procedural talk that satisfied the teacher's goal. While she researched students' responses to other students' texts, Freedman's work also argues for students to be given a freer hand in deciding how and what to discuss.

From the review of the literature, two points rise to the surface again and again. First, teachers, students, and theorists value talk as a way of making meaning. Second, although they value it, teachers do not often deed control of the meaning-making process to the students. While it may be valued, authentic talk is not often encouraged. It looks like it may be time to explore exactly what does happen when people who read literature talk about it in an unstructured format.

Methodology

Wanting to explore what an outside-the-classroom, authentic literature discussion involved, I audio-taped three book club discussions conducted between November 1992 and April 1993. After the discussions were recorded, I transcribed them and as fully as possible.

After the discussions were transcribed, I further separated the discussants' turns into t-units, as Marshall described in his paper (1989), and numbered them. Each separate, distinct thought is delineated as a t-unit.

Subsequently, I further coded each unit as belonging to Marshall's model of classroom discourse coding as a way of trying to compare classroom discourse to these authentic discussions. I found Marshall's system to be inadequate for the type of thick description these discussions merited, so I compiled and organized the discussants' comments in categories.

Results

As I combed through the discussion transcripts and reviewed the literature, several items for analysis arose as areas to probe.

Units per Turn

One aspect of Marshall's coding system that was extremely useful was the concept of units per turn. Marshall and Flood and Lapp have used this concept as a way to compare classroom interactions with one another as well as authentic interactions with classroom talk. In the overall averages of 431 conversational turns and 769 t-units per discussion that I recorded, it was helpful to look at how long each discussant spoke with respect to the number of t-units she used. The average of 1.78 units per turn (upt) was slightly higher than either Marshall (1989) or Flood and Lapp (1992) found in their studies. That, on its own, means little, when the range in Marshall's study was 1.1 to 1.7 upt. The upt might have been even higher overall were it not for the large numbers of affirmations, "Yeah's," present in the discussion.

What interested me further is that, for each succeeding group of one

hundred turns, the number of upt rose, beginning at 1.39 and ending with 2.32. Several possible reasons exist for this increase. First, many times in the beginning of the discussion, people cooperatively described scenes in the novel or story for others who did not read the works. Those interchanges usually consisted of several people interjecting phrases into a milieu of description, thereby raising the number of turns of one unit in duration. Secondly, as a discussion begins, people may be more jittery and therefore prone to make shorter comments. Perhaps as the discussion moves along, their comments lengthen as they feel more at ease. Thirdly, as the discussion wears on, people may become tired and less animated, and therefore less likely to interrupt the speaking of others to interject an affirmation or add a comment.

The implication of this overall higher number of upt seems to be that when allowed to address any issue in the discussion of text, these book club members speak for a slightly longer time than is common in classrooms. Also, as the discussion moves along, respondents speak for increasingly longer amounts of time. Discussions in most secondary schools are bounded by the length of the class period, which may be as short as 20 to 30 minutes, so students may not have the opportunity to pursue their thoughts for extended periods.

Disagreement

From the time that I read Long's 1986 piece and her description of how the book club members she studied would not engage in much disagreement, I have been interested to look at how the members of this club disagree with one another. These women perceive that they often disagree with each other, contrary to Long's assertion in her work, so I wanted to look more closely at disagreement to see if their estimation was more correct.

A few times in the three discussions, members responded, "Yes [pause] and no," to comments that others made. Other times, members who wanted to disagree responded, "Yeah, but . . ." to another's remarks, and then would

continue on to describe textual or personal knowledge that made for a different opinion. These ways of dealing with disagreement do not look like disagreement. They are indirect in their approach, and in each, the other members' responses were acknowledged and accepted and then rebutted.

A second way that disagreement was presented in discussion occurred when two speakers talked about a previous conversation where they disagreed about a character's reaction to what happened to him. In this excerpt, after she summarizes why she had developed a different opinion, June reiterates that she and Ellen had disagreed.

J: That's why I really think that it hit him harder than you said.

E: Yeah, but I also thought that she'd forgiven him.

This short interchange shows not only a "Yeah, but . . ." statement, but also a reference to each other's previously differing opinions and the interpretations which back them.

Further reflection makes me wonder how closely Long looked at the discussions that book club members had in her presence. I wonder if she thought disagreement came only in negative evaluations and direct challenges. As I looked closely at the transcripts I made, I saw much disagreement, but it was never hostile and rarely direct.

Requesting Affirmation and Authentic Questioning

Several times during discussions, discussants requested affirmation of opinions or ideas. Often book club members asked, "Didn't it?" or "You know?" as a way of requesting information about whether or not they had appropriately comprehended the text, developed an opinion that was plausible, or were being understood by their listeners.

Aside from the requests for affirmation and contrary to Flood and Lapp (1992), where the majority of questions that were asked in the discussions they studied served to direct and control the discussion, the questions that were asked in these discussions were genuine questions. Often, members asked

questions to start the discussion, but they did not dominate the conversation after having asked that the group address a specific topic. At most times, as in the following excerpts, certain members had information that other members requested to hear because they really wanted to know it.

J: The son never goes to jail. The mother rats on the son.

E: And then what happened?

J: They move to Texas. And they lead a very dysfunctional life, I think.

E: The father stays with the mother and the sister?

J: He only goes to jail for like six months. He comes back and they all live together.

A: Yeah, and he goes to jail for contempt. He won't tell. Isn't that what he goes to jail for?

J: Yeah.

A: It's not that he goes because he's tampered with evidence.

K: Why does the dad go to jail?

J: Contempt.

In another excerpt, one member is asked several authentic questions before she gives the information she knows, again contrary to Flood and Lapp's research that saw questioning as a way of exerting power in discussion. Until she had been asked four direct questions, June did not take control.

E: He can write about women so well. [*unintelligible*] Do you know much about his life? Was his homosexuality always a secret?

J: Did you read or see Morris?

E: Yes. Wasn't that published years after he died?

J: Yes. It was published after he died, but I think it was pretty autobiographical, of that period of time in his life and that particular person he fell in love with.

A: So what was that about?

Engagement

The discussants responded with engagement in three key ways--descriptive text talk for the relay of response, parroting characters' words or thoughts, and placing words into characters' mouths or minds.

Descriptive Text Talk for the Relay of Response

Most members used heavy amounts of text summary in their talk. During one discussion where members talked about seven short stories, they constantly referred back to the texts of the stories to find quotations to back up their statements. When the texts under discussion were longer ones, members relied more on their memories to supply them with references.

At one point in one of the discussions when one woman asked how a certain scene was presented in the movie version of Howard's End, fifteen quick, short utterances by several members supplied virtually all of the details that she needed to visualize the scene. Because of several such exchanges, the discussants look as though they only retell the story in a very elementary way, while they were actually using cooperative turns (Smith & Marshall, 1992) to meet the need in answering the question that a friend posed.

Another reason for speakers to use large amounts of text description came in the relaying of responses to the reading process. Speakers frequently described the scene and then vocally acted out their response to the scene. For instance, comments such as June's reaction to Leonard's death in Howard's End typified just such a relay:

> Wasn't that timing absolutely incredible? I mean all the time it took Leonard to get there, you know, and then there's like a huge, terrible mix-up. There's all this activity. And then there's this scream, one of the women screams, and Charles assumes that he's done some other sort of horrible act. Oh, it's just like you want it all to stop. "Just stop a second. Just everybody take a deep breath, and no one'll get hurt.."

Smith and Marshall mentioned that women "discussed their experience of reading and their habits of reading, topics that the men seldom addressed," (Smith & Marshall, 1992, p. 10) yet even their token mention of the phenomena does not adequately describe the intense emotional engagement that readers described when they discussed the work.

When members spoke, as did June, about their reactions, and when they laboriously detailed favorite scenes, I saw something again, beside text description, going on. I believe that the speakers wanted to recreate the experience for themselves and (re)create the experience for others, thereby re-living the text as they discussed it. If members listen to their friends speak, they are transported back into the first experience of the text. Again, June narrates her reading:

> J: It was hard to watch Mr. Wilcox. He always treated him as just another piece of paper that came across his desk.
>
> //Several "yeah's."//
>
> Wasn't it? It was so unimportant to him, and it meant everything to Bast, everything. And there was no way Wilcox could ever see that,
>
> F: //No. No.//
>
> J: and when he said, didn't you just cringe when he said, "What? What? I told him to leave the Porphyrion? Why? Why that's a perfectly good house. Why would he want to leave?" You know, it was like, "Huh?"

As she spoke, there were several agreements and acknowledgements that the listeners were following June's description, and when she finished the description of her response, several people acknowledged they had had that same response and were experiencing it again.

Parroting and Placing

Another way of engaging with the text is the parroting of characters'

words. In the interchange above, June reiterated Henry Wilcox's dismay at his own words by saying them in just the way that arrogant, ignorant character said them,"What? What? I told him to leave the Porphyrion? Why? Why that's a perfectly good house. Why would he want to leave?" Again, by acting out the character's intent with his words, June re-engages with the text and evokes reactions similar to her own in her listeners who engage in a sort of reading with her as she speaks.

Respondents again placed themselves and their interpretations into the text and evoked engagement with the text by placing words that were never actually said but were intimated into the mouths or thoughts of the characters. One such occasion occurred at the beginning of a discussion when June and Ellen are explaining their differing opinions about the characters, the book, and the movie Howard's End:

J: Well, you pointed out that one scene when she's looking from their apartment across at the Wilcoxes' after they've moved in, and I didn't see it that way, but after you mentioned it, I did, but it looked like she was looking at it like, "This is the life I want."

E: "I'd like to be in this picture."

In the above exchange, June describes what she remembered of Ellen's narration of Margaret's inner, unexpressed thoughts, and Ellen corrects her, placing her own words into the character's mind. Other placements occurred throughout various discussions, as with these from a discussion of Before and After by Rosellen Brown.

T: I think there's something basic about protecting the young. That it's like basic instinct. You want to help [unintelligible] this incriminating evidence. His mind was working. You know, "Get rid of it." Without even like consciously making a decision. You just do it.

. . .

J:And also I think she realizes he daughter has a point, "Nobody's

dealing with the truth in this situation." And the daughter is like looking at all of them, "How can everybody be lying all around me? What's true anymore?" . . . And her idea, "What if it had been me, Dad? What if I had been the girl?"

Implications for Secondary Education and Further Research

As I look at the results of the research I have conducted, several questions related to secondary literacy education arise. First of all, while the group members studied here are adults, would secondary students discuss and respond in ways more similar to adults or elementary students, who have been studied in "The Book Club Project"? Within that overarching question, would the discussions extend for long periods of time, limited only by the school's schedule? Would the units per conversational turn increase as the discussions lengthened? How would the students handle disagreements of interpretation? Would they be direct or indirect, as this study indicated? How would they question themselves and others in their groups? Would they question themselves and others at all? Would engagement as an overarching response mode lend the initial form to most of their responses? Would they parrot and place characters' thoughts? Would the free-ranging discussions that depended solely upon the discussants' personal and collective ideas be enough to sustain an on-going group relationship, as it has for the group studied here?

Generally, this research elucidates two overall avenues for further research. First of all, it indicates that students may benefit from a chance to develop group discussions and relationships surrounding text. They may speak for longer times than they would in classrooms, and they may be able to begin to make their own meanings from texts that are usually described for them by a teacher. They may benefit from and enjoy a chance to explore their own and each other's ideas without direction, and they may, for the first time for many of them, be able to ask and address authentic questions.

References

Cazden, C. (1988). Classroom discourse: The language of teaching and learning. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc.

Flood, J., & Lapp, D. (1992, December). A study of teacher's [sic] participation in a contemporary multicultural fiction reading discussion group. Paper presented at the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Freedman, S.W. (1992). Outside-in and inside-out: Peer response groups in two ninth-grade classes. Research in the Teaching of English, 26, 71-107.

Hunt, R., & Vipond, D. (1985). Crash-testing a transactional model of literary reading. Reader, 14, 23-39.

Hurst, K. (1988). Group Discussions of Poetry. In M. Benton, J. Teasey, R. Bell, & K. Hurst, Young Readers Responding to Poems London: Routledge.

Long, E. (1987). The book as mass commodity: the audience perspective. Book Research Quarterly, 3, 9-27.

Long, E. (1986). Women, reading, and cultural authority: Some implications of the audience perspective in cultural studies. American Quarterly, 38, 591-612.

Marshall, J.D. (1989). Patterns of discourse in classroom discussions of literature. A report for the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.

McMahon, S.I. (1992a, December). Balancing personal response with skills and strategies: A case study of five students as they participated in book club over the course of their fifth-grade year. Paper presented at the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.

McMahon, S.I. (1992b, December). Student-led book clubs: what will children discuss when given opportunity to interact among themselves about text? Paper presented at the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Nystrand, M., & Gamoran, A. (1991). Instructional discourse, student engagement, and literature achievement. Research in the Teaching of English, 25, 261-290.

O'Flahavan, J., Erting, L., Marks, T., Mintz, A., & Wiencek, B.J. (1992, December). At the intersection of mind and society: Synthesis of research on small group discussion about text from a sociocultural perspective. Paper presented at the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Raphael, T.E., McMahon, S.I., Goatley, V.J., Bentley, J.L., Boyd, F.B., Pardo, L.S., & Woodman, D.A. (1992). Research Directions: Literature and discussion in the reading program. Language Arts, 69, 54-61.

Smith, M.W., & Marshall, J.D. (1992, April). Toward an understanding of the culture of practice in the discussion of literature: An analysis of adult reading groups. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

Sweigart, W. (1991). Classroom talk, knowledge development, and writing. Research in the Teaching of English, 25, 469-496.